

## Testimony Regarding

### H.B. 5242 AN ACT ESTABLISHING AN ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE & EXPLOITATION TASK FORCE H.B. 5243 AN ACT CONCERNING ADULT SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Children's Committee  
Tuesday, March 1, 2022

Good afternoon, Senator Anwar, Representative Linehan, Senator Kelly, Representative Dauphinais and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share our support of **H.B. 5242 An Act Establishing an Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Task Force** and **H.B. 5243 An Act Concerning Adult Sexual Misconduct**.

The Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence (The Alliance) is the state's coalition of nine community-based sexual assault crisis services centers who provide 24-hour crisis interventions including hotline services, counseling, support groups, accompaniments in hospital, police and court settings, and advocacy while navigating complex criminal justice processes. In addition, The Alliance's attorneys on our Victim Rights Center of Connecticut (VRCCT) team provide no-cost legal counsel to victims and our Post-Conviction Victim Services (PCVS) victim advocates provide victim notification and services to victims whose offenders are being supervised by the Office of Adult Probation Sex Offender Supervision Unit and the Parole Special Management Unit. For nearly 40 years, The Alliance has provided comprehensive, victim-centered and trauma-informed services to child, adolescent and adult survivors of sexual violence across our state.

In addition to working with survivors, The Alliance spends a significant amount of time working in partnership with communities to raise awareness about the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence and how to prevent it. As the pandemic created conditions that both increased sexual violence perpetration and survivors' isolation post-assault, we saw the number of children and families reaching out to us for services climb. Over the course of the last year, we have seen a nearly 12% increase in children under the age of 18 disclose as victims of sexual violence and those numbers are only increasing as our advocates continue to be welcomed back into schools and communities. With children being given unprecedented, and often unsupervised, access to online spaces during the past two years, there has been an [international increase in the online exploitation](#).

In some cases, the sexual violence experienced by children began online. Grooming is frequently used in virtual spaces, enabling those seeking to cause harm to chip away at virtual boundaries before escalating to boundary-crossing in person. The instinct of many adults is to blame children for their online activity, to question their age-appropriate behaviors, rather than to look at the behaviors and motives of the person seeking children out online. Online grooming and mistreatment, as well as the victim blaming that children experience and the lack of accountability for those perpetrating harmful behaviors, normalizes abuse which enables it to escalate into adolescence and adulthood.

Our member center advocates, Post-Conviction Victim Services advocates, and team of attorneys, can provide ample real-life examples of the ways that online platforms are used to establish or enhance a harmful relationship with a child, engage in collecting and sharing abusive images of children, or seeking to parlay a virtual relationship into an in-person interaction. With more children than ever having access to the internet and few opportunities for meaningful and ongoing education about the need for online safety, it is critical to investigate and establish sustainable responses to online abuse and exploitation.

**For these reasons we ask to be included as a member of the task force as we can bring the victims point of view to the conversation.**

In our experience of working with children and families, we support prospective federal efforts (see below) to spotlight the responsibility of online platforms to protect children, creating more education and support for parents and caregivers, establishing collaborative approaches to investing in child protection systems that are responsive to online abuse, creating opportunities to investigate the harmful gender norms pushed by online platforms that contribute to the normalization of the sexualization of children, and bringing children into the conversation as a critical part of developing solutions that work for them.

I would also like to draw your attention to proposed federal legislation, co-sponsored by Senators Blumenthal and Blackburn, that would aim to similarly create safer spaces for kids online. Introduced in February, the [Kid's Online Safety Act](#) is a comprehensive piece of legislation that would broadly do the following:

1. Require social media platforms to provide minors with options to protect their information, disable addictive product features, and enable the strongest settings by default
2. Give parents new controls to help support their children and identify harmful behaviors, and a dedicated mechanism to report harms to children on the platform
3. Require social media platforms to perform annual, independent audits to assess the risks to children, their compliance with this legislation, and report on steps taken to prevent such harms
4. Provide academic and public interest organizations with access to their data to foster research about the harms of social media to youth

These efforts will bolster the work being done in Connecticut and create more universal accountability for online platforms and those who harm children online and in person. We thank the committee for their work in considering the impacts online spaces have on the safety of children and extend the expertise of our coalition to support these efforts.

I would also like to express our support of **H.B. 5243 An Act Concerning Adult Sexual Misconduct** and the inclusion of additional questions about sexual violence victimization in future Connecticut School Health Surveys; however, we feel it important to consider the scope of the additional questions as proposed in the bill. We think it critical to not focus attention solely on sexual assault or misconduct by an adult, understanding that many youths experience sexual violence perpetrated by peers or near-peers outside of the context of a dating relationship (the current question about sexual violence

victimization asks if a child has experienced sexual violence in a dating relationship). In addition, we support a mechanism for youth who disclose being abused or at risk of being abused to receive immediate support and the adults who are responsible for those interventions having ongoing training to ensure their ability to effectively intervene.

The Alliance, in partnership with the State Department of Education and Department of Children and Families, authored the [Statewide K-12 Sexual Assault & Abuse Prevention & Awareness Program Guidelines \(2016\)](#) and has continued to provide comprehensive prevention and awareness education in schools throughout the state through a network of dedicated sexual violence prevention educators at our member centers. In the years since the passage of [CGS Sec. 17a-101a A Statewide Sexual Abuse and Assault Awareness and Prevention Program](#), we have identified several statewide challenges with the practical implementation of the requirements of the legislation. There remains a significant amount of support, resources and policies needed by schools to successfully come into compliance with the legislation. We see H.B. 5243 as a necessary next step to reinvest in helping our school communities to support children who have experienced sexual abuse and create school climates that support the prevention of sexual violence.

Thank you for your work to support the children and families in our communities.

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